

The Contributions of Psychological Science to Media Research: A Historical Outline

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Abstract

This paper throws insight into integration of two academic disciplines and endeavours to identify the psychological inputs to communication theorizing and media research. Communication research became a major preoccupation of psychologists from the beginning of 20th century, when psychology had almost established itself as a scientific discipline and communication was making its beginning as a subject worthy of academic consideration. The early application of psychology for the understanding of communication behavior can be traced back to the field of advertising. A synthesis of behavioral and cognitive psychology provided a basic framework. It is in the area of study of attitude formation and change that psychologists have made significant contributions to media studies—the role of media in formation and change of attitudes, opinions and beliefs. Besides persuasion research another area of media research which has greatly attracted psychologists is media violence. These research initiatives culminated in the emergence of new branch of psychology, namely Media Psychology, which in India has great potential for research and placements, and introduction of courses in the Universities must be given an academic priority.

Keywords: Communication research, psychology, behavior, advertising, cognitive psychology, attitudes, media violence, media psychology

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH; NEW BEGINNINGS

Communication emerged as an independent academic discipline in the early part of the previous century borrowing heavily from social, psychological and behavioral sciences. This has been acknowledged by no less an authority than Wilbur Schramm (Schramm, 1997) who was at the forefront of academic communication programs in their initial stages at various US universities. He has identified the “founding fathers” of this new discipline as political scientist Harold Laswell, experimental psychologist Carl Hovland, social psychologist Kurt Lewin and sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Further, reviewing the milestones of mass communication at the end of the 20th century, Lowery and DeFleur (1995) have confirmed that “Communication research is an extension of the methodology and theory building strategies of the social and behavioral sciences” (p.15).

The contribution of psychology, however, has been major in delineating communication process and explaining its effects. Given the major focus of psychology being analysis and explanation of behavior and communication being a behavioral act, it was well within the scope of psychology to engage in delineating the process of communication and explain its effects. Nevertheless communication research became a major preoccupation of psychologists from the beginning of 20th century, when psychology had almost established itself as a scientific discipline and communication was making its beginning as a subject worthy of academic consideration.

The early application of psychology for the understanding of communication behavior can be traced back to the field of advertising. Psychology has contributed a wide array tools, theories and techniques to the practice of advertising. Historically, we should begin with J.B. Watson, the founder of American ‘behaviorism.’ Watson worked for J. Walter Thomson, for some time. He was, perhaps, the first to recognise the importance of human emotions for making effective advertisements. He suggested that the basic emotions like love, fear and rage are key factors contributing to the effectiveness of advertising. As someone has pointed out that Watson’s “advertisements sold toothpaste, not because of its dental hygiene benefits, but because whiter teeth would presumably increase an individual’s sex appeal”. It was again J. B. Watson who promoted the use of celebrity endorsements.

Then, it was Harry Hollingworth, another psychologist, who made some important contributions to modern day advertising. Hollingworth suggested that advertising to be effective must achieve four things: It must attract consumer's attention, focus his attention on the message, make him remember the message and finally, cause him to take the desired action. These initial suggestions of Hollingworth have been corroborated by later persuasion researchers. William McGuire's (McGuire, 1968) communication-persuasion model, for example, provides an excellent corroboration. McGuire's model which is essentially an information processing analysis includes five stages: attention, comprehension, acceptance, retention and action. To begin with, there must be exposure to the message. Then, one has to give attention to the content of the message. There is no response to advertising message if there is no attention to it. Attention is selective and this selectivity is guided by personal relevance. The content of the message has to be comprehended in relation to one's needs and gratification of those needs. Retention and recall of the message content is also crucial for the success of the message. Finally, message must be accepted and acted upon.

A synthesis of behavioral and cognitive psychology provided a basic framework. The initial impetus came from American Behaviorism leading to the early conception of hypodermic needle model which treats communication messages as stimuli and its consequences on the receiver as responses (see: Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). The challenges to this simplistic S-R model came from many sources. A more inclusive formulation within the framework of learning theory principles evolved out of the work of Yale Group of Experimental Psychologists, under the leadership of Carl Hovland. Hovland and Janis (1959) conceived communication situation as an interplay between source, message and channel characteristics, on the one hand, and audience predispositions, on the other, in a given setting through the operation internal mediating processes (attention, comprehension, and acceptance) in order to produce observable communication effects (changes in opinion, perception, affect, and action). It is in the area of study of attitude formation and change that psychologists have made significant contributions to media studies—the role of media in formation and change of attitudes, opinions and beliefs.

The work of Hovland and his colleagues (Hovland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949) in the Information and Education Division of the War Department during World War II focused on the psychological processes underlying attitudes and their modification in response to communication messages. It was around the same time several efforts to analyse propaganda were made. The Institute of Propaganda Analysis (1938) came up with a psychological analysis of propaganda techniques such as *name calling*, *glittering generalities*, *transfer*, *testimonial*, *plain folks*, *card staking* and *bandwagon*. The Nazi propaganda and Gobble's rhetoric during World War II was analysed by the Yale psychologist Leonard Doob and major propaganda principles were identified.

One of the other significant contributions from the field of psychology to communication research is the work of Osgood and his colleagues (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957). Osgood was basically an experimental psychologist and became interested in psycholinguistics. Osgood's contributions to communication studies are many. He developed a model of communication in association with Schramm (Schramm, 1954) which has clearly delineated communication process and its various elements. His book on 'Measurement of Meaning' identifies three dimensions of meaning viz., evaluative, activity and potency. Besides conceptualizing attitude as evaluative dimension of a concept, Osgood provided a tool to measure attitudes *i.e.*, the semantic differential scales. These scales became very handy to communication researchers to assess various attitudes and changes in attitudes as dependent variables of communication and its manipulations as independent variable.

Another strand of psychology that influenced communication research was social psychology and group dynamics, notably the work of Kurt Lewin. The work of Lewin and his students highlighted the importance of group process in mediating the impact of communication in changing attitudes and behaviors. The truth of the matter is that nobody lives in isolation. Our thoughts, attitudes and actions are intricately interwoven with those of others in the groups to which we belong. Both the membership groups and reference groups provide a framework for us to evaluate our own opinions and actions, and these evaluations modulate them. The recognition of the influence of group in the communication process minimized the omnipotent potential of

communication in producing automatic responses on the part of the recipients of messages. The classical research on auto-kinetic effect by Sherif (1935), on conformity by Asch (1951), on Bystander Effect by Darley & Latne (1968, 1971), on Obedience by Milgram (2004) and on Deindividuation by Zimbardo (1969)—all these provided useful explanations or interpretations for mass media effects in the context of groups.

TURNING POINT IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Communication research in the latter half of 20th century was dominated by cognitive psychology, particularly the so called cognitive consistency theories. Heider's Balance Theory (Heider, 1958), Newcomb's A-B-X model, Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) and Osgood and Tannenbaum's Congruity Principle (1955) prominently figure in this cluster of consistency theories, and particularly Festinger's theory dominated persuasive and advertising research of the latter half of twentieth century. The need for balance, congruence and consistency serves as a major motivating force and serves as an influence over perception and behavior. Because individuals seek to maintain cognitive balance, their attitudes and beliefs help them select information to which they will attend, how much of it they comprehend, and the ways in which they incorporate messages in their perception and experience. In short, cognitive psychological theories of communication hold that communicators selectively attend to and avoid communication messages and participate in those events that are consistent with their belief and value structures (see: Freedman & Sears, 1965).

The psychology of motivation, specifically Maslow's (Maslow, 1954) theory of hierarchy of needs has made inroads into media research studies by way of uses and gratification theory of mass media use. Uses and gratifications perspective explores why and how people actively seek out specific media content to satisfy their specific needs. Instead of asking the usual question 'what media does to people?' this theory seeks answer to the question, 'what do people do with media?' Maslow's pyramid of hierarchy of needs containing biological needs at the base moving through safety, security, social, ego and self-actualisation at the top provided a basic framework for analysis of needs that audience seek out to gratify variety of media contents. Blumer and Katz (1974) have identified several of these

needs emerging from an array of studies into five categories namely, cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension release needs.

Besides persuasion research another area of media research which has greatly attracted psychologists is media violence. The coming of TV as entertainment in the middle of the 20th century gave rise to issues of media violence and psychologists became focused on questions relating to consequences of watching media violence. Although some psychologists believe that viewing violence has cathartic effect (Feshback, 1961), most of them have adhered to the position that exposure to media violence causes consequent aggressive behavior among the viewers, especially young children (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993). Bandura's Social Learning Theory offered a useful psychological perspective for media violence studies. Several psychological mechanisms have been identified establishing a connection between media violent content and later anti-social activities, primarily aggressive behavioral acts. These include: cognitive priming, desensitization, lowered physiological arousal, observational learning, and justification. The amount of empirical evidence in support of these explanations from the experimental psychology labs is enormous and even cursory summary of those studies beyond the scope of this presentation.

Psychologists were not only interested in finding causal connections between exposure to media violence and consequent aggressive behaviors, they were also concerned with the long term socialization effects of media content, particularly television models. What has come to be known as 'cultivation research' focused on mass media impact the perception of social reality and how media shapes users 'world views'. One of the significant findings was that heavy viewers of television would perceive that the real world was more akin to what was portrayed on television, and they tend to estimate the prevalence of higher levels of danger in the world and feel more distrustful of fellow beings than light viewers of television. The research also found that television models, in the absence of other live experiences, formed the basis of reality and shaped their attitudes toward race, sex roles and professions. The researches by Gerbner and his colleagues (Gerbner et al., 2002) are highly representative of studies in the area of cultivation research.

The above developments spanning over almost a period of a century culminated in the emergence of new branch of psychology, namely Media Psychology. In 1987, the American Psychological Association crafted the Media Psychology Division, 'The Society supports the study and dissemination of information related to the impact of the media on human behaviour.' (apa.org) ('Division no. 46'.) Media psychology is regarded as branch of psychology which studies the relationships between media and human behavior. Media psychology assumes the nature of interdisciplinary science encompassing inputs from several disciplines such as sociology, psychology, linguistics, information theory and mass communication. The focus is to investigate how people interact with media and each other due to media influence. The scope of media psychology spans across the production, processing and impact of mass media messages on individuals and societies. Specifically, the focus of media psychology centers around themes such as: delineating the process of communication and identifying the role of attention, perception, comprehension and retention in the process; studying the impact of mass communication on cognitions, affections and behaviors; analysing the role of media on escalation or de-escalation of social aggression, national conflicts, terror and fanaticism; and investigating media production and consumption patterns. Media psychology has the potential to engineer media content so that it can be used to the best advantage of humanity.

It is often heard that 21st century belongs to India. Information technologies and media applications are pervading Indian society affecting nearly every aspect of our lives—not only what we wear and what we eat, but also how we think and feel. In this context, media psychology in this country has great potential for research and placements, and introduction of courses in the field in Indian Universities must be given an academic priority.

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